

**PATRICK OLIVELLE**

(University of Texas)

**On the Road.  
The Religious Significance of Walking**

**Abstract**

The social construction of the body has been the focus of recent scholarship in a variety of disciplines. This paper investigates the way walking, that is, the moving body, is socially constructed within the different religious ideologies of ancient India. Beginning with the Vedic period, we find that walking takes on a religious significance in India culminating in the ascetic ideology of wandering ceaselessly without a permanent place of residence. Walking is also the bodily expression of liminality. Walking can be seen as the opposite of rest, stability, and structure, the opposite of social space, of home and village. The meanings of difficulty, danger, and gain are latent in many of the ritual uses of walking, including warfare. The warrior ethic posited that if the danger prevailed and the soldier died, he would gain a heavenly reward in place of the earthly. Thus the intimate and inextricable connection is made between difficulty, danger, and gain – all three of which required that one abandon structured and secure space and enter the liminal world of the traveller.

The phenomenon of bodily movement – especially walking, the most basic form of bodily movement – and how it is invested with cultural and religious meanings that far transcend its biological functions is a significant aspect of the process whereby the human body is created as a cultural product. As in other areas of bodily symbolism, I am interested in how this biological characteristic that we share with other animals has been culturally recreated to communicate social messages especially within ritualised forms of walking, and what these messages tell us about the societies that create them.

In his ground-breaking paper “Techniques of the Body” before the Société de Psychologie in 1934, Marcel Mauss (1973) demonstrated how bodily movements and manipulations are culturally determined. Other scholars in diverse fields of inquiry have built on this basic insight and investigated how various kinds of bodily manipulations carry social messages.<sup>1</sup> The British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1982: 65) has expressed

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bynum 1987; Brown 1988; Eilberg-Schwartz 1990; Feher et al. 1989.

succinctly the theoretical presupposition in the study of the social significance of body manipulations, namely, how the cultural creation of the human body parallels the creation of the social body:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society... The forms it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways. The care that is given to it, in grooming, feeding and therapy, the theories about what it needs in the way of sleep and exercise, about the stages it should go through, the pains it can stand, its span of life, all the cultural categories in which it is perceived, must correlate closely with the categories in which society is seen in so far as these also draw upon the same culturally processed idea of the body.

In this paper I want to do two things. First, I will attempt to trace some major institutions and rituals in the history of India in which walking plays a significant role. Second, I will attempt to explore some theoretical insights that may explain the significance of walking within these Indian religious and cultural institutions.

### Vedic institutions

I begin with some data from the early history of India. The earliest Aryans were nomadic cattle herders, and this cultural memory is embedded in some of the institutions of the late Vedic period when nomadism had given way to settled village life. Travelling is part of the cultural memory of the ancient Indians.

There is the story of one Rohita embedded within the well-known legend of Śunaḥśepa recorded in the *Aitareya-brāhmaṇa* (7.14-15) of the *Ṛg-veda*, a story that is of significance to our inquiry. Rohita's father, the childless king Hariścandra, following the advice of the ubiquitous sage Nārada, had made a vow that if he had a son he would sacrifice him to god Varuṇa. The unfortunate Rohita was born to Hariścandra, who managed to postpone the inevitable for many years. To cut a long story short, when Hariścandra could find no further excuse, Rohita, the prudent man that he was, ran away from home and "wandered for a year in the wild" (*sa saṃvatsaram araṇye cacāra*). The verb *√car* used in these texts is significant, and it will reappear in many forms within the institutions and ideologies of walking and wandering in later literature.

Hearing that his father had been struck with a stomach disease by the irate Varuṇa, Rohita decides to pay his father a visit. On his way home he is accosted by the god Indra, who tells him:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We see here an interesting opposition between Varuṇa, the sovereign god, and Indra, the impetuous newcomer engaged in warfare. Is Varuṇa here a symbol of the sedentary and Indra that of the adventurous?

Great is the prosperity of him who is weary (*śrāntasya*)  
 So have we heard, O Rohita;  
 Evil is he who stays among men,  
 Indra is the friend of the wandering man (*carataḥ*).  
 Do, indeed, wander (*caraiva*).<sup>3</sup>

Two significant points are made here, and they will be reiterated in later conversations between Rohita and Indra. Wandering or roaming outside human habitations has greater value (religious, social, economic) than living a stable life among them, and this wandering in the wilderness is related to a major concept in Vedic theology, namely *śrama* – the toil associated with creation, procreation, and sacrifice (Olivelle 1993: 9-24). Note also the verb used for wandering: *carati*, a verb that we will encounter frequently within the context of ritualised walking. Indra gives the same advice as he accosts Rohita every time he decides to come back home, five times in all. And his parting advice is the same: “Do, indeed, wander”:

Flower-like the heels of wandering man (*carataḥ*)  
 His body grows and is fruitful;  
 All his sins disappear,  
 Slain by his toil (*śrameṇa*) on the road.

The fortune of him who sits also sits,  
 That of him who stands also stands,  
 That of him who lies also lies down,  
 But the fortune of him who moves (*carataḥ*)  
 will indeed move.

Kali he becomes who lies (*śayāna*),  
 Dvāpara when he rises (*saṃjihāna*),  
 Tretā when he stands erect (*uttiṣṭhan*),  
 And Kṛta when he walks (*caran*).<sup>4</sup>

Wandering (*caran*) one finds honey,  
 Wandering the sweet Udumbara fruit;  
 Consider the pre-eminence of the sun,  
 Who never wearies of wandering (*caran*).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *nānā śrāntāya śrīr astīti rohita śuśrūma | pāpo nṛṣad varo jana indra ic carataḥ sakhā caraiva ||*

<sup>4</sup> These refer to the four throws of the dice in the ancient Indian game of dice. In later time, however, these terms may have been interpreted as referring to the Yuga theory of world ages.

<sup>5</sup> *puṣṭinyau carato jaṅghe bhūṣṇur ātmā phala-graḥiḥ | śere 'sya sarve pāpmānaḥ śrameṇa prapathe hataḥ || āste bhaga āśīnasyordhvas tiṣṭhati tiṣṭhataḥ | sete nipadyamānasya carāti carato bhagaḥ || kalih śayāno bhavati saṃjihānas tu dvāparaḥ | uttiṣṭhaṃ tretā bhavati kṛtaṃ sampadyate caran || caran vai madhu vindati caran svādum udumbaram | sūryasya paśya śremāṇaṃ yo na tandraḥ caran ||*

Note the repeated use of the verb  $\sqrt{\text{car}}$  in this interesting cultural evaluation of the moving body and its contrast to the static or stable body. The medieval commentator Sāyaṇa glosses it with *pariyāṭana*, another verb that acquires the meaning of religious walking, as evident in expressions such as *bhikṣāṭana*, ‘walking the begging round’. The moral of the story is clear: moving about brings prosperity and riches; staying at home is unproductive; the moving body is superior to the sedentary one.

The most famous, and also the most significant, occurrence of the verb  $\sqrt{\text{car}}$  is in the compounds *brahma-cārin* and *brahma-carya*, expressions found in the oldest Brāhmaṇical literature as well as in Buddhist and Jain discourse. In later history a *brahma-cārin* is a Vedic student, a boy who has undergone Vedic initiation (*upanayana*), and *brahma-carya* often simply means chastity or celibacy. The verb  $\sqrt{\text{car}}$  and related terms such as *carya*, likewise, come in time to mean simply ‘observing, doing, performing’, especially with reference to a religious act such as a vow: hence expressions such as *vrata-caryā* ‘performance of a vow’. In the older period, however, a *brahma-cārin* is not a boy but an adult and his *carya* in fact referred to his life of ceaseless movement to acquire *brahman*, probably Vedic or another kind of esoteric knowledge. In the famous eulogy of the *brahma-cārin* in the *Atharva-veda* (11.5), for example, he is said to have a long beard, and the hymn begins: *brahma-cārī carati* – “the wanderer after *brahman* wanders”, emphasising his association with travel. Jan Gonda (1965: 285) in his detailed study of *brahma-carya* rightly concludes:

That an ambulatory life was regarded as typical for the *brahmacārin* may be inferred from TB [*Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa*] 3, 4, 1, 16 where a certain correlation is supposed to exist between him and the way (*adhvan-*) and from TĀ [*Taittirīya-āranyaka*] 7, 4, 2 *ā mā yantu brahmacārīṇaḥ ... vi mā yantu ... pra mā yantu b*. The frequent use of the verbs *eti* and *carati* in [the *Atharva-veda* hymn to the *brahma-cārin*] (11.5.1; 6) may point in the same direction.

At the *Puruṣa-medha*, moreover, a *brahma-cārin* is sacrificed for the road (*adhvane brahma-cārīṇam*), reinforcing the connection between the *brahma-cārin* and travelling, see *Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa* 3.4.16. Even in later usage, moreover, the young Vedic student indeed leaves his home and family and travels to an unfamiliar place, the house of his teacher, where he is reduced to the level of a servant and is required to sleep on the floor and to beg for his food.

Another important figure associated with the road in the early Vedic period is the enigmatic *vrātya*. Some scholars have seen him either as a figure on the fringes of orthodox Brāhmaṇical society or as a precursor of later-day wandering ascetics. The work of Heesterman (1962) and Falk (1986) have shown the inadequacy of both explanations and related the *vrātya* to the central act of Brāhmaṇical religion, namely the Vedic sacrifice. Falk has shown that the *vrātyas* were probably disadvantaged young men; for example, second sons in a society where inheritance was governed by primogeniture. Their travel

and cattle raiding were intended to make their way up the economic ladder and to enable them establish their own homes. The habits of the *vrātya*, such as travel, aggression, and cattle raiding as well as his undisputed ritual power, are indeed some of the central features of the ancient sacrificial theology and practice. For our purpose the significant point is the association of the *vrātya* with the road and travel and with warfare and booty.

The association of an initiatory rite with dangerous but lucrative activities is also noted in the rituals of war. We hear, for example, of kings who were *raṇe dīkṣita*, ‘consecrated for battle’. In battle and raid one increases one’s wealth and prosperity, which after all is also the purpose of the Vedic ritual. This may well be what Indra meant when he said that the fortune of him who sits still remains static, while that of a man on the move increases. These conceptions are captured in the old compound *yoga-kṣema*, where *yoga* refers to the period when the clan was on the move to obtain new pastures, new cattle, and new wealth, and *kṣema* refers to the period of sedentary life.

### Ascetic wandering

The most famous case of religious walking in India is that of the wandering mendicant of Brāhmaṇical, Buddhist, Jain, and other forms of asceticism. A passage in the rather early *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka-upaniṣad* (4.4.22) speaking of a *muni* who has the knowledge of *ātman*, says: “desiring this very world wandering ascetics (*pravrajinaḥ*) depart as wanderers (*pravrajanti*)”. Here the old term *carati* is replaced by *pravrajati*, and it will become the standard term to indicate the ritual departure of an ascetic from home into a state of homeless wandering. The same term occurs in the stock phrase of the Pāli canon regarding the departure from home of a Buddhist monk: *agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajati* – “he goes forth from home to the homeless state”. In both the Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist vocabularies the noun *pravrajyā* (Pāli *pabbajjā*; ‘going forth’) is used to designate the initiatory ceremony that accompanies the departure of an ascetic from home.

The actual life of ceaseless wandering of an ascetic, however, is more frequently referred to by the related term *parivrajati*, the wandering ascetic himself being called *parivrajaka*. The verbal roots  $\sqrt{car}$ ,  $\sqrt{at}$ , and  $\sqrt{vraj}$ , especially in association with *pari* (‘around, round’), are the ones used most frequently with reference to ascetic wandering. The connection between wandering and toil (*śrama*) that we saw in the story of Rohita is also evident in *śramaṇa*, a common epithet for a wandering ascetic.

Although the reality of ascetic life in India was complex and changed with time, the theological ideal and norm of wandering, of being homeless and not having a stable residence, was maintained, sometimes merely as a theological and legal fiction, in almost all Indian ascetical traditions until the late middle ages. The ancient legal treatise of Gautama (3.20), for example, gives the rule: “Outside the rainy season, let him not spend two nights in the same village” (*na dvitīyām apartu rātriṃ grāme vaset*). Medieval texts, likewise, advise the ascetic to walk alone without asking for directions, wandering the earth like a worm along the path pointed out by the sun. He is told to make his home

where he happens to be in the evening: *yatra-sāyam-grha*. His ideal residence is at the foot of a tree (*ṣṛkṣa-mūla*).

Within this life of statutory wandering, there is a daily routine that further underscores his life of religious walking, a ritual that he shares with the Vedic student, or *brahma-cārin*. Either in the morning or in the afternoon, depending on whether you subscribe to the Buddhist or the Brāhmaṇical custom, the ascetic takes his begging bowl and does his “begging walk”, or *bhikṣāṭana*.

*Vihāra*, the term for a Buddhist monastery, means a place where one strolls about. Within monasteries there were special places for religious walking, called *caṃkama* (from the verb *√kram*, ‘to step’ or ‘to pace’).

Medieval texts often identify the wandering ascetic with Viṣṇu. A statement of interest to our inquiry occurs frequently in these texts: “Vāsudeva has two forms, the mobile (*cala*) and the immobile (*acala*). The mobile form is the ascetic and the immobile consists of images.” At least implicitly the moving form of Vāsudeva is considered superior to the stationary. The contrast between the moving ascetic and the static temple is drawn even more sharply in Vīraśaiva literature. A.K. Ramanujan (1973: 88) translates beautifully this poem of Basavaṇṇa:

The rich  
will make temples for Śiva.  
What shall I,  
a poor man,  
do?

My legs are pillars,  
the body the shrine,  
the head a cupola of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,  
things standing (*sthāvara*) shall fall,  
but the moving (*jaṅgama*) ever shall stay.

Within Vīraśaivism *jaṅgama* is the term for the wandering ascetic who is the visible form of god to the faithful as he walks from village to village. “Basavaṇṇa in the above poem,” Ramanujan (1973: 21) comments, “prefers the original to the symbol, the body that remembers to the temple that forgets, the poor though living moving *jaṅgama* to the rich petrified temple, the *sthāvara*, standing out there.”

### Pilgrimage

Apart from the wandering ascetic, the most widespread religious institution associated with walking and travel is pilgrimage. The Sanskrit word for pilgrimage is *yātrā*, from

the verb  $\sqrt{yā}$  ‘to go’ or ‘to walk’. A point I want to make at the outset – a point I will return to later in my paper – is that the category pilgrimage may indeed hide a wide diversity of actual practices and that “pilgrimage” may not be a single reality. In other words, we should not expect to find the same features, whether they be motives, customs, or symbols, in different practices that scholars have chosen to call “pilgrimage”. Indeed, the Maharashtrian *Warkaris* distinguish their communal walk to Pandharpur from the common *tīrtha-yātrā* (Engblom in Mokashi 1987: 23-24). With the introduction of modern modes of transportation, moreover, the centrality of walking, even in those pilgrimages where historically walking was significant, may be fast disappearing; other meanings may have come to the foreground or been invented.

I have chosen to focus on two pilgrimages because in them the centrality of walking is most clearly visible. The first is the pilgrimage to the temple of Ayyappan in Sabari Malai in Kerala described by E. Valentine Daniel (1984: 245-278). The second is the *Warkari* pilgrimage to Pandharpur in Maharashtra described by Iravati Karve (1962) and D.B. Mokashi (1987).

V. Daniel was a participant observer in the trek to Sabari Malai. Several vows are observed by the participants for 45 to 60 days prior to the pilgrimage, vows by which the pilgrims are gradually weaned from society (Daniel 1984: 247). These include sexual abstinence, going without shoes, meat, and intoxicants, bathing three times a day, and sleeping on the bare floor. The participants lose their former names. The pilgrims are now identified with Ayyappa and addressed by that name. On the eve of their departure they undergo an initiation rite at which they are given the requisites of a pilgrim: a two-pouched cloth bag for the head with ritual items such as coconuts and ghee, and another pouch with provisions for eating and sleeping. A death ritual is performed for the pilgrims; they are not to be touched by others after that. The group of pilgrims made their way by car to a place called Eru Meli from where the actual walk to Sabari Malai started, a journey of forty-seven miles along rough hilly terrain. As Daniel describes it, the group of pilgrims constituted the perfect “communitas” envisaged by Victor Turner (1969). Contrasting his experience with that of the *Warkaris* described by Iravati Karve (1962), Daniel (1984: 255) writes:

we ate a hurried and frugal lunch, sharing our food with whomever happened to be near us, with no distinction between Brahmin and Parayan, Nayar and Turumban ... among Ayyappans no caste distinctions remained for caste commensalism to be practiced. I am somewhat ashamed to admit that I was the only pilgrim who jealously guarded his precious little boiled water.

If Daniel presents an accurate picture of the experiences of his group of pilgrims, much of what is ordinarily taken as important in a pilgrimage – motives, expectations, power of the site of pilgrimage, gods, rituals – all that fade into the background. The walk itself – the bruised feet, the tired legs, the sweltering heat, the awful smells, the

utter and mind-numbing pain – occupies the foreground. Above all, it is this experience of pain – the *śrama* and *tapas* of walking – that marks the event as something special and unique, something sacred and even as something liminal. Let us, however, begin at the beginning. Before starting on the sacred walk there was a ritual and communal defecation and urination. “To me and to many other pilgrims – most of whom were urban, middle-class individuals,” writes Daniel (1984: 250), “this was quite a liminal experience. We had never done this in public before, in the company of ritual defecators to the right, left, front, and back, each only two feet away, solemnly doing his thing while precariously perched on two felled tree trunks thrown over trenches, with no walls around nor roof above.” The overpowering smell of human excrement is a theme that both Daniel and Mokashi comment on extensively. Daniel describes one of his precarious trips to a river to take a ritual bath with 100,000 other bathers:

The rocky/gravelly shores were covered with squatters in the morning twilight. It would have taken an acrobat to tiptoe his way through the piles of human excrement, which seemed to be as numerous as the stones and pebbles that covered the shores... I sludged and slid my way into the water and quickly immersed myself but once and returned to the river bank feeling helplessly filthy. I fetched my comb from my knapsack and let it slide through my dripping hair. I looked at the comb and saw something brown adhering to its teeth. I lifted the comb to my nose. It stank of night soil. For a few moments, which in fact seemed like forever, nothing else existed besides me and the world outside me. This world, however, was not differentiated into pilgrims, a river, trees, stones, huts, campfires, or any other sensation that reached the five senses. The world outside was reduced to a oneness: It was all shit! (1984: 262-263)

This may not be the liminality and the levelling of *communitas* that Turner had in mind, but it surely levelled many distinctions. A similar experience is narrated by Mokashi (1987: 93) on the way to Pandharpur:

Suddenly, a stench, borne on the wind, assailed my nose, and it increased with every step. On both sides of my path there began to appear the signs of the ‘morning rituals.’ They increased until they filled the entire road... The other *Wārkarīs* there were going right through the middle of it – holding handkerchiefs or the ends of their saris to their noses, their faces set, determined to ignore evil things... When the procession moved on the stench must envelop the entire town.

Back, however, to the pain. Walking barefoot in the sun along rugged and rocky mountain paths, the pilgrim is overwhelmed by just one sensation. Daniel (1984: 256) notes again: “If there is one single sensation that predominates over all other sensations,

in terms of sheer intensity and quantity, it is the sensation of pain.” As the climb goes on, the intensity and the all-absorbing nature of the mind-numbing pain increase. The hurt of the blistered feet, the pain in the knees and hips, and the splitting headache that had until now been differentiated all merge into one single and all-absorbing pain: “In the words of one pilgrim who reflected on this phase of the climb, ‘there is nothing else I knew, heard, or felt. I was too tired to feel tired. All I heard was my voice calling out, ‘Ayyappo, Ayyappo, Ayyappo’. Nothing else existed except my call and I. This was when I began to know my Lord in the true sense.” (Daniel 1984: 266)

Let us now turn briefly to the *Warkari* pilgrimage to Pandharpur dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The pilgrimage is organised into several Palkhis (processions accompanying palanquins), in each of which is carried the sandals, often silver replicas, of a Maharashtrian bhakti saint, such as Jñāneśvara, Tukārām, Eknāth, or Nāmdev. The Palkhi processions of different saints start from different places, the most celebrated, that of Jñāneśvara, traveling from Alandi to Pandharpur, a distance of 150 miles and taking 15 days. The Palkhi is in a sense a meta-pilgrimage. The pilgrims are actually reenacting the pilgrimage of their favorite saint, accompanying him to Pandharpur. The presence of the saint among his people is significant: his sandals symbolise his walking along these same roads. Here too walking is the central feature and experience of the entire pilgrimage.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Mokashi (1987) devotes 218 pages to describing the pilgrimage, out of which less than a single page is devoted to his final arrival at Pandharpur, the place of pilgrimage, and what he actually did there. Iravati Karve devotes a single paragraph to her arrival there. The point of the pilgrimage appears to be the walk itself, not the arrival at the destination. Haberman (1994: viii) also notes about the Ban-Yatra at the Vrindavan that “what makes this pilgrimage unique among many previously studied journeys is that it is self-expressedly purposeless... The path of the Ban-Yatra is circular; in the end it goes nowhere.”

Pain once again is a dominant theme. “We are conscious,” writes Mokashi (1987: 108), “of nothing but our tired feet.” There are easier and shorter ways of getting to Pandharpur, if that is where the pilgrims want to go. Yet the arduous walk along rugged terrain is the central focus of the pilgrim. The walk takes the pilgrim to Pandharpur, but it appears that the walk is as important as, or perhaps more important than, the arrival at Pandharpur.

A regular feature in many places of pilgrimage, especially in South India and Sri Lanka, is a very special type of ritual walking that I want to touch on very briefly here. It is fire walking (Obeyesekere 1978). Devotees walk barefoot across a long pit filled with burning coal. I am unable here to address the complex ritual, physiological, and psychological issues arising out of this fascinating custom, but the walking across fire and the pain that it must cause – and, in spite of statements to the contrary, there is pain – is a significant example of religious walking in India.

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<sup>6</sup> Engblom in fact sees this as the distinguishing feature of the *Warkari*: “The relative emphasis the *Warkari*s place on the actual journeying portion of their pilgrimage is one of its principal distinguishing features within the overarching system of pilgrimage in India.” (Mokashi 1987: 27)

### *Pradakṣiṇa*

The final case of religious walking I want to address is possibly the most pervasive in Indian society, and that is *pradakṣiṇa*, or the circumambulating of a person or an object keeping it to one's right. It is uncertain how ancient this practice is, but its antiquity is suggested by the fact that it forms a central act of the Hindu marriage ceremony. The bride and groom go around the fire to the accompaniment of mantras, after which they take seven steps towards the north. This act according to the legal and the ritual traditions constitutes the essence of the marriage; after that the couple are legally married.

The architecture of Indian temples and Buddhist *stūpas* show the central place *pradakṣiṇa* occupied in Hindu and Buddhist ritual. Around the central room housing the god or goddess, the *garbha-grha*, there is invariably a walkway. The devotee circumambulates the god along this walkway before taking *darśana*, that is, seeing and being seen by the god. The same is true of Buddhist *stūpas*; decorations of these walkways – pillars, toranas, and railings – are some of the finest architecture of ancient India.

In some interesting ways, however, this walking in a circle is connected to walking to a holy place, that is, pilgrimage. Walking around a *tīrtha*, called *parikrama*, occupies a central place in the ritual repertoire of a place of pilgrimage. The *Kāśi-khaṇḍa* of the *Skanda-purāṇa*, for example, describes 16 types of *parikramas* of Benares. The most important of these, the *pañca-krośi-parikrama* takes place over a period of five days and circumambulates the whole of Benares (Eck 1982: 41-42). An extended version of this, called *malamas* ('leap year'), continues for a month, and Vidyarthi (1979: 88) notes "the close interaction between the pilgrims belonging to various castes and sects" who live together for a month. Mokashi (1987: 209-210) also records a *Wārkarī* who circumambulated the entire procession as it was progressing towards Pandharpur, thus walking with the Palkhi procession while walking around it. When pilgrims go to the place of Kṛṣṇa's birth and childhood, they perform the Ban-Yatra, which is again a long circular walk in the woods following the footsteps of Kṛṣṇa as he played the flute, danced, and made love to the gopis. David Haberman (1994) who went on the walk again talked ceaselessly of the sheer pain and exhaustion.

An important form of *pradakṣiṇa* studied by Anne Feldhaus (2003: 27-38) is the circumambulation of an entire river, in this case the *Narmadā-parikrama*. The pilgrim would start at the source, walk down stream on the south bank to the mouth and walk upstream on the north bank back to the source. The most elaborate circumambulation is that recorded in the *Mahā-bhārata* (3.80-153): when one closely follows the pilgrimage to all the *tīrthas*, one notes that the pilgrim has in fact made a *pradakṣiṇa* of the whole of India (Bhardwaj 1973: 43-57).

### **Death on the road**

In concluding this survey of religious walking, I want briefly to note the close relationship between religious walking and a religious death. The worst way to die is

to die at home in one's own bed. The warrior ethic clearly placed a premium on dying in battle. The Brāhmanical equivalent of this was to become a wandering ascetic and thus to die on the road and in the wilderness. The most famous of such deaths on the road is the *mahā-prasthāna*, a form of ritual suicide in which a person walks towards the north without food or water until he or she falls down dead. The heroes of the two epics end their lives in this manner, and it is even recommended to the new renouncer immediately after his rite of renunciation (see Olivelle 1978).

### **Walking and liminality**

Let me finally turn to the second question I want to address in this paper. The question itself is rather simple: why does walking occupy such a prominent role in the religious institutions and rites of India? What symbolic meanings are communicated and what social realities are created or reinforced by these ritual manipulations of the body? The answers, however, are difficult and complex. I will only attempt to sketch some possible avenues of inquiry.

A possible point of departure in addressing this question is Victor Turner's (1969, 1974, 1978) many and detailed studies of liminality. It was Arnold van Gennep (1975) back in 1909 who introduced the concept of liminality in his study of what he termed rites of passage. In a rite involving a passage from one social status to another, the subjects of the ritual passage are first separated from their former status, then left for a period in a state of "betwixt and between", neither here nor there – that is, in a liminal state – and finally reintegrated into their new social status. Turner shows how liminal persons are reduced to "structural invisibility". They are often taken out of the social space of home and village and treated like dead persons. The liminal state stands as an anti-structure against the structure of society, and people in the liminal state constitute a perfectly egalitarian community without rank or distinction, a state that Turner calls "communitas". This anti-structural communitas is expressed primarily within rites of passage in simple tribal societies, while in more complex societies its primary mode of expression is pilgrimage. Besides pilgrimage, other institutionalised forms of liminality in complex societies may include monastic and ascetic orders.

In pilgrimage and asceticism one can readily see some of the constituent elements of the liminal state. Pilgrims and ascetics leave their social space and either wander around or travel to a distant "center out there" where their former social identities are merged into a new sacred identity shared by fellow ascetics or pilgrims. Often there are other features signifying the separation from their former identities: shaving the head, simple and identical clothes, commensality, abstention from sex, and even the assumption of a new name. Walking signals this liminal passage between the old and the new; the moving body is neither here nor there. Liminality need not be purely ritual; in the cattle raid or the battle, the trek and movement represent the potential for rewards. The risk

of movement carries the prospects of reward. If we follow this logic, we can see why it is the walk itself that is valorised in pilgrimage and ascetic wandering.

Peter van der Veer (1984) has applied Turner's model to the Hindu pilgrimage to Ayodhya. He finds, however, that the *jājmani* system of relationship between pilgrims and priests that both accentuates caste distinctions and separates the pilgrims from each other in terms of caste and place of residence virtually excludes the very possibility of a Turnerian *communitas*. "A simple dichotomy between structure and anti-structure," van der Veer concludes (1984: 66), "can ... not comprehend the complexity of the Hindu pilgrimage to Ayodhya."

Looking at Hindu pilgrimages from a different vantage point, Ann Gold (1988) appears to arrive at a similar conclusion and finds little corroboration of Turner's theory of pilgrimage in her own ethnographic work. She confesses that she went into the field expecting the pilgrim to be a temporary and half-baked type of *saṃnyāsin*. "By studying householders as pilgrims and viewing pilgrims as temporary renunciators, then," she writes, "I expected to be able to show that renouncer's values were far from alien to householders and that release [i.e. *mokṣa*] was in fact integral to these." (Gold 1988: 5) Little wonder, then, that the reality of the actual pilgrims did not measure up to these lofty expectations.

Are Turner's insights then inapplicable to the reality of the Indian pilgrimage and, by extension, to the other forms of religious walking, such as that of the wandering ascetic? A couple of observations need to be made here. First, as I have already noted, the term "pilgrimage" itself is a scholarly category that encompasses a variety of "religious travel" thereby hiding profound differences between different types of such travel. Pilgrimages to different places or to the same place by different individuals may constitute very different social and religious phenomena that cannot simply be subsumed under the same category. Further, the motives for and the nature of a pilgrimage may undergo historical changes; I think this is especially so when travel is made easier and less dangerous and when new modes of transportation are introduced. Finally, different individuals may go on pilgrimages with different motives and expectations and return with different experiences. Clearly, the pilgrimages described by Gold and van der Veer, have little in common with the *Warkari* or the Ayyappan pilgrimages. Secondly, Turner presents an ideal-typical model of the liminal state, a model that is probably never completely realised in an actual ritual setting. Further, his model is drawn principally from tribal rites of initiation and is thereafter extended to pilgrimage. The reality of the pilgrimage is different and more complex than that of rites of passage and Turner's examples of pilgrimages – such as the Muslim Hajj and the Maharashtrian *Warkari* – are highly selective.

I want to see whether we can modify Turner's concept of liminality by moving it away from the ideal-typical and the purely anti-structural towards a more realistic model reflecting the variety of actual practices associated with rites of passage in India and whether such a modified view may help us understand the meanings and symbolisms of ritual walking. Indeed, if we take the most well-known instance of liminality in India – the state of a Vedic student or *brahma-cārin* – we find that many features identified

by Turner are present. The student is taken away from his home and transferred to a new social space where he is reduced to the position of a servant. He is shaven-headed, sleeps on the floor, practices sexual abstinence, and begs for his food. Normal rules of impurity – such as at the death of a relative – do not apply to him. Yet, many subtle but central elements of class rank are preserved: the material of his girdle and the type of wood and the length of his staff, for example, are determined according to his *varṇa*. Even in such a seemingly insignificant point as the etiquette of begging, class distinctions are maintained. A Brahmin student places the address “Lady” (*bhavati*) at the beginning of the ritual request: “Lady, give alms” (*bhavati bhikṣām dehi*), a Kṣatriya in the middle, and a Vaiśya at the end. The liminal state of a student produces a levelling, but not a perfect leveling, a *communitas* but not a perfect *communitas*. Little wonder then that caste distinctions are maintained among most pilgrims.

Turning to walking itself, I think that it is a good candidate for the bodily expression of liminality. Ritual walking can express the “structural invisibility” of the liminal person. Walking can be seen as the opposite of rest, stability, and structure, the opposite of social space, of home and village. It can, for example, express the passage from one state to another as a movement from one place to another. It is important to note here, however, that not all forms of walking are ritualised in this manner – indeed, walking is too common and too important an aspect of human existence to be so ritualised. As we have seen, the most significant ritual walks involves a movement away – either really or in a ritualised form – from social space, whether it be home or village. It is such walking that is valorised, not the walking that takes place *within* the social spaces of home or village.

Even though walking can ideally symbolise passage, we still need to discover what experiences underlie the cultural understanding of walking. For this purpose, imperfect as it may be, I want to take a somewhat historical approach and examine the earliest available evidence. If we look at some of the ritualised travel in the early Vedic period, we see that the travel from home and village involved at least three central elements: danger, difficulty, and gain. Paradigmatic of such fruitful but dangerous travel was the cattle raid associated with the Vṛātyas, as well as with the Vedic sacrifice and royal rites. Ancient Indian warfare also fits this model, for its primary motive was to win land and booty. The warrior ethic also posited that if the danger prevailed and the soldier died, he would gain a heavenly reward in place of the earthly. Thus an intimate and inextricable connection is made between difficulty, danger, and gain – all three of which required that one abandon structured and secure space and enter the liminal world of the traveller. What I am hinting at here is the possible close connection between the economic activities of hunting, raiding, and warfare, and the ritual expressions of liminal travel. Surely, performing a rite before engaging in the dangerous adventures of war or raid is but the other side of the coin of ritual battles and raids within the confines of a rite.

The Vedic sacrifice is, for the most part, directed at securing naked power and profit in a world governed by the law of the fishes – eat or be eaten. Ritual and war alike are aggressive in nature and intent, and their aggression is manifested in undertaking

expeditions to win new wealth. Such a view would add a new dimension to liminality: the liminal is sacred because it is both dangerous and profitable. The person returns from the liminal phase back into society with a new status because he is richer and more powerful.

Another dimension of walking as conquest is revealed in the famous myth of the dwarf incarnation of Viṣṇu. With his three steps Viṣṇu measured the entire universe (RV 1.22.16-21) and thereby brought it under his control. This mythical walk is called *viṣṇu-krama*, and the same term is used for the three steps that a sacrificer takes between the sacrificial altar and the *āhavanīya* fire in which the oblations are offered.<sup>7</sup> The sacrificial enclosure is ritually identified with the universe. The sacrificer ritually appropriates the universe to himself by traversing that ritual universe.

The meanings of difficulty, danger, and gain are, I believe, latent in many of the ritual uses of walking. The idea of gain through pain was transformed into the concepts of *śrama* and *tapas* both within and outside the ritual context, and it is later found especially in ascetic torture of the body. As Indra told Rohita, the fortune of one who sits stands still, while the wealth of the man on the move keeps rolling on. This aspect is also clearly evident in the pain associated with walking experienced and treasured by the pilgrims. The gain, moreover, is often redefined in non-material terms, such as gaining heaven or *mokṣa*. Indeed, on closer examination the difference between the aspiration for *mokṣa* that Ann Gold expected to find and the material motives she actually found in her pilgrims is not as great as she believes it to be. The principle is clear: if something can give you *mokṣa*, it can *a fortiori* give you a cow or a son.

If this cluster of meanings attached to walking is plausible, then we can see how in a ritualised form walking can be used as a sign of liminality in a variety of seemingly unrelated situations. As the Vṛātya travels to obtain cattle, so the *brahma-cārin* travels to acquire knowledge. As the king sets out to conquer territory, so the ascetic sets out to conquer death and rebirth. One thing alone is certain: staying at home is a recipe for failure. Death at home means an unprofitable death, while death on the road brings reward. In its ritualised form, the travel, the walk itself, is of primary importance. We can see why the *Warkari* or the Ayyappan pilgrim must walk, feel the pain of tired feet, in order to undergo the desired transformation. It is the walk, the pain of the walk that is fruitful and productive.

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<sup>7</sup> A similar conquest through ritual walking is found in the wandering of the sacrificial horse before it is killed in the *aśva-medha*.

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